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NEW YORK POST
26 September 1983

Senate wants him to bare Kremlin's SALT violations

By ROWLAND EVANS and ROBERT NOVAK



THE 93-0 Senate vote demanding that the Administration report on Soviet SALT violations gives President Reagan what he really wants but his diplomatic and political advisers don't: a rationale for concisely stated, provable charges of nuclear cheating by the Kremlin.

Reagan has dropped hints for months that the time has come to call the Soviets to account. Writing on Sept. 12 to a close friend who had complained about mild U.S. retaliation against the Soviet Union's shootdown of the Korean airliner, Reagan said:

"We have some screws that can be tightened and I have screwdriver in hand."

There is little doubt that the President was alluding to Soviet SALT cheating. But each time he was ready to go public, advisers intruded.

His diplomatic advisers feared that would ruin U.S.-Soviet arms control talks, and his political advisers worried about restoring Reagan's Attila the Hun image.

The Sept. 22 Senate vote changes all that, because a unanimous roll-call vote is hard to ignore. Whatever the State Dept. and White House West Wing think, Reagan is where he wants to be: under Senate command to report the disturbing pattern of Soviet cheating.

Moreover, even State Dept. detentists are fretting under escalating evidence of Soviet cheating.

"They've busted the SALT agreements," a top Foggy Bottom policy-maker blurted out to us.

In their first effort to use the air tragedy to get an Administration accounting of alleged Soviet violations, conservative GOP Sens. James McClure and Jesse Helms tried to tack their amendment to the congressional resolution condemning the Soviet Union for the Korean airline disaster.

That failed, 45-50, because of a bipartisan deal — orchestrated by the White House — to accept no amendments.

But in falling, the vote revealed to surprised Republicans a large reservoir of support from liberal Democrats.

That led to the second effort last Thursday, when the amendment was tacked onto the State Dept. authorization bill. Sen. George Mitchell of Maine, a widely respected bearer of liberal Democratic colors, told us:

"This is a matter of such seriousness that it has gone far beyond slogans."

Support from such unaccustomed sources on a sensitive arms control question leaves Ronald Reagan in a position of

unique strength to overcome nay-sayers in his own Administration.

He also has the evidence, thanks to the top-level verification panel set up last April. The panel's chairman, National Security Council director William P. Clark, ordered an immediate study by NSC staffers documenting Soviet non-compliance.

That study, which has been completed on current intelligence data, details a long and sorry story: suspected Soviet testing of two "new type" ICBM missiles, despite a SALT II ban on more than one; deployment of what U.S. intelligence officials call a "battle-man-agement" radar in the interior part of Siberia, violating the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; consistent violations of the treaty ban on underground testing of weapons with an explosive force of more

than 150 kilotons.

Even though the SALT treaties are so notoriously ambiguous and porous that absolute proof is hard to obtain, the Senate means business in demanding an accounting of every piece of non-compliance evidence available to U.S. intelligence. The House will undoubtedly concur.

That puts the President in an enviable position, considering his basic instincts. Under congressional mandate to produce, it will be easy for him to play the real Ronald Reagan and send the violations report to Capitol Hill.

That may cause sulking on his White House staff and in top drawers of the national security bureaucracy, but it's what the President always has wanted. He now has his screwdriver in hand.